

## “Make Your Vote Count”

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We have all heard the prophecies about fiascos occurring on Election Day: long lines at the polls, voting machines that crash, malicious hackers corrupting electronic voting systems or the optical scanners used to count paper ballots. The list goes. It also ignores one of the biggest threats to the election: voters mistakenly casting their ballots for candidates they did not intend to support. Unlike the other threats, this is one careful voters can avoid.

Butterfly ballot redux? Maybe not. But, I the results of a multi-year, multi-state study conducted by a team of computer scientists, psychologists, and political scientists, which I headed, demonstrate that enough voters could accidentally choose the wrong candidate to change the outcome of a close election. Our study, funded by the National Science Foundation and the Carnegie Corporation of New York showed that even with the simplest vote—the vote for president--roughly 3 percent of all voters err in choosing. Most of the errors involve choosing a presidential candidate (and vice presidential candidate) whose name listed immediately before or after the candidate the voter intended to select. This error results in a “double whammy.” Not only does the preferred presidential candidate fail to receive a vote; that vote has a strong probability of going to the preferred candidate’s major opponent.

Our study included a paper ballot/optical scan system, a touch screen system, a system with dials and buttons, and systems with and without paper trails. These systems include those used nationally and in the Washington, DC tri-state region. The study found that things only get worse when voters move down the ballot, when voter fatigue might set in or when voters are asked to perform somewhat more complicated tasks, such as choosing more than one candidate for the same office, as they are frequently asked to do in judicial elections or school board contests.

Of course not all voting machines are the same. The differences in results are not huge, but voters casting ballots on standard touch screen systems, like that used in Maryland, are likely to make fewer errors than those using paper ballot/optical scan systems or the dial and buttons system used in parts of northern Virginia. However, huge discrepancies appear among those who cast write-in votes. Although the responses of the more than 1,500 voters participating in our study, and common sense, indicate that it should be easier to write in a candidate on a paper ballot almost 30 percent of all voters using the paper ballot casting a write-in vote on a paper ballot are likely to have done so in vain—almost ten times more than the number using any other type of voting system. The reason? They forget to fill in the oval (or complete the arrow) alerting the voting system that they cast a write-in vote.

Fortunately, there are things voters can do to ensure they get things right. The best thing all voters can do is to bring a marked up sample ballot with them to the polling place. This will enable them to quickly transfer the information from that ballot to the real thing, saving times and cutting down the likelihood of errors due to snap decisions. Voters using touch screen or other electronic voting systems should pay careful attention to the review screen. The screen will highlight any races or ballot questions where the voter has not made a selection, making it easy for those who accidentally forgotten to register a choice to do so. Voters using these same systems can also compare the screen to the sample ballot they brought with them.

Voters using paper ballot/optical scan systems will have to be more vigilant when checking their ballots. These systems don't have review pages that highlight missing votes. Some vote scanners have a small screen that alerts voters who did not make a selection in a specific race or who made more selections than is allowed in a given election—the latter error cannot be made on electronic systems. Voters need to pay attention to this small screen to catch their errors. The remedy for forgetting to make a selection is simple: just fill in the oval. The remedy for a wrong selection is more demanding. The best way to correct an incorrect vote choice is to discard the ballot and start again. Voters who cross out one choice and fill in the oval for another are likely to have that vote nullified because the scanner will treat them as two completed ovals. Voters who attempt to erase the incorrect choice and fill in another oval also risk having their vote nullified, depending on whether too much of the original mark is present. This is a risk no one should take.

All voters should take these precautionary steps in the voting booth. And, if you are voting on paper and casting a write-in vote, be sure to fill in the oval, complete the arrow, or do whatever is required. Otherwise, all of that neat penmanship goes for naught.

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